DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 330 108 EA 022 849

AUTHOR Tallerico, Marilyn
TITLE Local Politics in Practice: Learning To Be a School Board Member.
PUB DATE Apr 91
NOTE 36p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, April 3-7, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Boards of Education; Elementary Secondary Education; Group Dynamics; Group Experience; Learning Processes; Local Issues; Orientation; Participative Decision Making; Politics of Education; School Districts; *Socialization

ABSTRACT

School board members' perceptions of the socialization process involved in the learning and development of their roles are described in this report. Methodology involved indepth interviews with 28 school board members from two rural and three suburban public school districts in Pennsylvania and New York, document analysis, and observation. Respondents reported that the most important things to learn include content and process within a unique context characterized by authority, accountability, and vulnerability; and that learning occurs through hands-on experience and the transfer of knowledge from other settings. A profile of board members indicates that they are capable and independent-thinking learners, purposefully engaged in multiple processes of self-directed growth and development. A conclusion is that theories of socialization tend to focus on external socializers; alternative perspectives are explored. Findings suggest an image of board members who proactively direct their own professional development. (57 references) (LMI)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
M. Tallerico
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ED330108

LOCAL POLITICS IN PRACTICE: LEARNING TO BE A SCHOOL BOARD MEMBER

A paper presented

at

the annual meeting

of the

American Educational Research Association

Chicago, IL

(April 7, 1991)

by

Marilyn Tallerico
Assistant Professor

Syracuse University
Department of Educational Administration
350 Huntington Hall
Syracuse, NY 13244
(315)443-2754

EA 022 849

NOTE: Please do not quote from this draft without the expressed permission of the author.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

LOCAL POLITICS IN PRACTICE: LEARNING TO BE A SCHOOL BOARD MEMBER

Though positioned at the apex of the formal power structure of local educational policymaking, America's school board members are an understudied group of key players. An historical review of related scholarship reveals that an apparent "heyday" of research interest in local school district governance occurred in the 1960s and early 1970s (Boyd, 1976; Cistone, 1975; Iannaccone & Lutz, 1970; Kerr, 1964; Lutz & Iannaccone, 1978; McCarty & Ramsey, 1968; Minar, 1966; Smith, 1974; Thomas & Gregg, 1962; Zeigler & Jennings, 1974). Though the demographic profile of school board members, and the context of educational leadership, have changed in the past 25 years, relatively little systematic study of school boards or school board members' perspectives has been conducted since that earlier era (cf., Institute for Educational Leadership, 1986; Muth & Azumi, 1987; Nowakowski & First, 1989).

Moreover, although the 1980s have often been viewed as the decade of increased state-level influence and control of education, more refined analyses underscore the continued importance and reciprocal influence of local policy control (Fuhrman & Elmore, 1990; Muth & Azumi, 1987; Nowakowski & First, 1989; Wirt & Kirst, 1989). It seems useful, therefore, to sustain inquiry aimed at local district-level educational policymaking and policymakers...the latter of which provided

impetus for the research reported in this paper.

The specific empirical gap herein addressed relates to the process of school board member learning. The purpose of this study was to describe how a sample of school board members view their own learning and development. Thus, the research was conducted from a phenomenological perspective; that is, from a concern for understanding human behavior from the actors' own frame of reference (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). The inquiry was guided by two general questions: (a) What is most important to know or be able to do, with respect to functioning as a board member? and (b) How does such learning occur?

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual foundations which underlie the study of board member learning and development encompass two distinct literatures: (a) theoretical and empirical work on adult socialization, and (b) a body of scholarship related to school board member training and development needs. Both are synthesized below.

The Socialization Literature

In their broadest sense, classic theoretical treatments define socialization as an ongoing, formative process which influences and shapes the behaviors, orientations, and values of individual members of groups or social systems (e.g., Goslin, 1969; Merton, 1968; Parsons, 1951). The transmission of knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes comprises the core of

socialization theory, and metaphors of molding, social conditioning, and enculturation characterize the overall process. This perspective, grounded in sociology and anthropology, emphasizes the social aspects of learning, with a focus on role acquisition and the adaptation to, and assimilation of, group norms and/or culture.

A small body of empirical work relates specifically to the socialization of school board members (Cistone, 1975 & 1977; Kerr, 1964; Zeigler & Jennings, 1974). This work implicitly accepts the assumptions that there exists a school board "culture" of norms and acceptable practice (Lutz, 1980) and that the dynamics of socialization are important to the process of new board member assimilation of that culture. Taken together, those seminal studies raised the question of whose socializing influences on novice board members' learning and behavior was strongest: superintendents' or veteran members' of the board?

Kerr (1964), for example, found that both superintendents and experienced board members were active agents in socializing novices, but that the substantive direction of socialization clearly reinforced the perspectives of the professional experts (i.e., school superintendents), rather than those of the lay public. Zeigler and Jennings' (1974) findings likewise support the notion of professional dominance and deference to school administrators' values and preferences, as does Griffin's (1988) more recent dissertation study of school board member socialization in Connecticut.

In contrast, Cistone's (1977) empirical test of Kerr's hypothesis and findings revealed that, when novice board members joined the school board, "they were already well socialized into the role as a consequence of recruitment, preincumbent experience, and anticipatory socialization" (p. 31). The concept of anticipatory socialization emphasizes role- and norm-learning which occurs prior to actual engagement in the new social context. This concept may be applied to school board member learning in the following way. Since there is considerable evidence of sponsorship by incumbents in the recruitment of new board members (e.g., Cistone, 1975), the inference follows that "a procession of like-minded men through office" (Eulau, 1969, p. 316) serves to ensure a degree of sameness and stability, both in policymaking and in the range of experiences, learned behaviors, beliefs, and shared expectations brought to the school board.

Both Cistone and Stout (1982) fault Kerr (1964) for overemphasizing the superintendent's influence in socializing board members, and for ignoring the power of "self-socialization" (Cistone, 1977) and "reciprocal socialization" (Cistone, 1977; Stout, 1982). Though Cistone neglects to fully explicate and develop the concept of self-socialization, both he and Stout (1982) seem to concur that, in reciprocal-socialization, superintendents, new members, and veteran school board members each learn from one another in largely unexplored ways...an acknowledgement of "the reciprocal influence dynamic that operates in every social system" (Cistone, 1977, p. 21).

Additional conceptual foundations related to school board member learning may be derived from the model developed by Stout (1982) in her dissertation study of new board member enculturation. She drew upon concepts from adult and occupational socialization (e.g., Moore, 1969), as well as small-group theory (e.g., Festinger et al., 1950; Hare, 1962; Parsons, 1961) and rites of passage (van Gennep, 1960) to formulate an overlapping four-stage model grounded in her data. The stages may be summarized as follows: (a) passage through the rites of candidacy, election, and oath-taking; (b) learning the norms and traditions of the school board culture; (c) learning the technical, cognitive, and analytic skills of board functioning; and (d) learning to reframe personal realities by tuning in to environmental forces and increasing tolerance of others. Miklos (1988), however, raises the issue that Stout's (1982) model does not appear to take into account Cistone's (1977) work regarding the preincumbency effects of selective recruitment and anticipatory socialization, as they influence new board member role-learning.

The Training and Development Literature

In addition to the extant theoretical and empirical work on socialization and enculturation, another strand of scholarship related to school board member learning is found in the literature on board training and development needs. This literature is quite diverse, therefore summary discussion will be divided into four parts:

1. Practitioner-oriented periodicals such as The School Administrator, The Executive Educator, and The American School Board Journal have a long history of publication of largely anecdotal and non-empirical accounts of school board training endeavors and efforts to improve superintendent-school board working relationships. Success stories are frequently shared in these forums, as are reports on innovative approaches to school board member workshops (e.g., Namit, 1989). Taken together, these publications generally promote the importance of orientation and inservice activities geared to helping board members become better at what they do.

2. There is a fragmented corpus of dissertation research which investigates (most commonly by state, or by geographic sub-region of an individual state) school board members' perceptions of their training or learning needs. Survey questionnaires are the typical means of data-collection for such studies. Findings most often identify voids in extant training opportunities, and confirm widespread agreement that board members need continuous inservice education, and that local development and delivery of such training are preferred.

A smaller number of dissertation studies identifies or rank-orders specific content/skill areas deemed important for inservice, and topics which frequently emerge include: legal issues, improving superintendent-board relationships, evaluating the superintendent, dealing with the media, and teamwork. Other studies seek to contrast board members' and superintendents'

views of school board member training needs. Kask (1990), for example, found that, while both superintendents and Ohio school board members agreed that training related to board role and responsibility was their highest priority need, school board members rated four additional training needs (personnel, business services, curriculum, and current issues) significantly higher than did superintendents. Kask (1990) interprets this difference to illustrate how superintendents often feel board members should learn and abide by "their classically defined role;" board members, however, wish to learn more about "areas perceived by administrators as best left to the 'experts'" (p. 267). Another noteworthy feature of the Kask (1990) study is that she does not limit her discussion to the conventional constructs of "training" and "inservice," but, rather, employs the concept of school board member development to frame her discussion.

3. There exist several larger-scale, non-dissertation studies which, although not directed primarily to questions of board member learning or socialization, do uncover and corroborate important findings related to superintendents and board members' perspectives on training and development (Cunningham, 1986; Cunningham & Hentges, 1982; Institute for Educational Leadership [IEL], 1986). This research reflects agreement that, although significant needs appear to exist, most school board members' opportunities for education and development are "merely informational and episodic," rather than geared towards "developmental skills-building" (IEL, 1986, p. 12). Both

the IEL (1986) and AASA studies (Cunningham & Hentges, 1982) confirmed that educational professionals at the district and state levels, (rather than experienced board members), control the agenda and direction of new board members' formal orientation to board work. The evidence suggests that "Leadership skill acquisition is not emphasized in most of the state [school board] associations' programs" (IEL, 1986, p. 47).

4. A fourth domain of the knowledge-base relevant to school board member learning encompasses the numerous educative documents produced by state and national agencies/organizations, such as the National School Boards Association (NSBA), the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), and The National Center for Nonprofit Boards. This literature, often organized in handbook format, is largely normative and prescriptive in nature. For example, it is not uncommon to find in such publications suggestions and guidelines for: effective boardsmanship, understanding legal responsibilities, recruiting new members, distinguishing policymaking from administration, evaluating the board, fostering productive relationships with the chief executive officer, hiring the CEO, orienting novices to the board, understanding open meeting laws, strategic planning, and improving basic communication skills. Like the three above-described categories of publications, these also tend to advocate strongly for increased attention to board member preparation, training, and continuing education. Moreover, these documents serve to subtly reinforce what have been described as major

traditions of board membership: that is, the norms of consensual voting, refraining from raising questions in public meetings which may be potentially embarrassing to the administration, and the value of teamness (Cistone, 1975; Kerr, 1964; Lutz, 1980; Stout, 1982).

In sum, the purpose of this discussion has been to construct a conceptual foundation for examining school board member learning and development. In the subsequent section, details regarding method are provided.

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

It was assumed that learning is a complex process and, therefore, methods of inquiry that would uncover how school board members thought about and understood their own development were required. This descriptive, interpretive study was guided by research standards and qualitative methodology associated with naturalistic inquiry and grounded theory, as explicated by Glaser and Strauss (1967), Guba and Lincoln (1985), Bogdan and Biklen (1982), Lincoln (1985), and others.

Sample and Data Collection

The principal means of data collection were one- to three-hour, in-depth, open-ended interviews of 28 school board members from 2 rural and 3 suburban public school districts in Pennsylvania and New York State. Sixteen of the interviewees are male and 12 female. One of the communities identified as suburban is a "college town." The socioeconomic composition

(SES) of the five sites ranged from low to high, although as is typical of non-urban board demographic profiles (e.g., Wirt & Kirst, 1989), all of the interviewees were of middle to upper-middle SES. The rationale for the non-urban focus is that the majority of America's approximately 15,500 school districts are in suburban or rural communities. A second rationale for the selection of this purposive sample was Lincoln's (1985) advice regarding "maximizing the range of perspectives" in the context under study (p. 147). Therefore diversity of sample was sought in terms of size and type of school district, as well as gender and longevity of board members. Additionally, the criteria of proximity to the researcher's sites of employment and accessibility of volunteer participants ultimately determined the specific composition of the sample.

Document analysis and nonparticipant observation were used to triangulate the interview data and to provide the researcher with a more complete portrait of the contexts within which school board member learning and development occur. Documents collected included agenda of within-district orientation sessions for new board members, programs of training workshops provided by state school boards associations, memoranda from superintendents calling attention to upcoming professional development opportunities for board members/educators, and handbooks regarding boardsmanship which interviewees chose to share with the researcher.

The foci of the nonparticipant observations were: live

school board public meetings, videotaped public meetings (provided by local cable television for one site), study sessions (as contrasted with "business meetings" of some boards), and formal training workshops sponsored by state school board associations.

Data Analysis

All interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and coded. Both hand-constructed matrices and standard wordprocessing software were utilized to assist with textual data management and pattern analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Constant-comparative procedures involving inductive analysis simultaneous to data collection were employed (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Both confirming and disconfirming evidence for emergent themes and patterns were sought, through subsequent interviews, document analysis, and observations. The substantive coding and clustering of content categories from the data drove the analysis and reduction processes, as well as the concomitant conceptual development. Appropriate literatures were revisited, as patterns of findings and conceptual clarity emerged.

Limitations

Although the procedures chosen for data collection are well established in the social sciences, they are not without drawbacks. While acknowledging the limitations of cross-sectional research, self-reports and retrospectives, it is important to note that the reflections and practical knowledge of experienced school board members remain a largely untapped source

of insights in the empirical knowledge-base. Also, of course, generalizations may not be able to be extended beyond the purposive sample. And lastly, space considerations preclude optimal sharing of the richness of respondents' examples and extended "stories." What follows, therefore, is a selected synopsis of patterns of findings.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

To reiterate, the two primary questions which drove this study were: (a) What is most important to know or be able to do, with respect to functioning as a board member? and (b) How does such learning occur? Findings regarding most essential learnings will be discussed first. These emerge as two broad (and perhaps conventional) categories that relate to "content" and "process" ...but with an interesting contextual twist on the latter.

What's Important to Learn

Critical content knowledge, from the respondents' perspectives, meant learning <u>about</u> the system itself, the organization's work, and the general field of education: programs, curricula, budget and finance, school district operations, extracurricular activities, laws, physical plant, personnel, policies and procedures, collective bargaining, and current issues. Cognitive learning researchers (e.g., Anderson, 1982, 1987) would likely refer to the learning of such new substantive domains as "declarative" or "propositional" knowledge (as distinguished from "procedural" knowledge). Regardless of

preferred terminology, there are no surprises in this laundry list of respondent-generated essential domains. Previous survey work (e.g., Cunningham, 1986; Cunningham & Hentges, 1982; Kask, 1990) has surfaced similar findings. And students of board member socialization (e.g., Stout, 1982) have shown that, although such learnings are, of necessity, ongoing throughout one's career on the board, the acquisition of this declarative/propositional/content knowledge is often keenest during the first three-five months of incumbency.

What previous studies have not fully investigated or disclosed, however, are the underlying rationale for board members' ascription of importance to such knowledge. Perhaps this "why" question seldom gets asked because the "predictable" reply could be anticipated to emphasize the intended purpose of rational, informed decision-making. Yet the present inquiry reveals more subtle goals which supplement the latter, for example: (a) to build public trust and confidence in one's familiarity with issues and operations (regardless of whether the "public" is external or internal to the school district); (b) to save face, (that is, to be spared what some see as the embarrassment of being asked a simple question about the schools and being unable to provide the answer); and (c) to demonstrate, particularly to the internal constituency of teachers, that board members "care" about who they are and the work they do for children. This range of reasons may be interpreted as illustrating a rich backdrop of highly nuanced political

considerations which frame board member learning...and which is seldom captured via quantitative research approaches. The notion of a politically-unique learning context will be revisited and expanded upon in the ensuing section.

Learning the Process

The meaning respondents' attributed to "process" knowledge included what is traditionally encompassed by the concepts of basic human relations or interpersonal skills, as well as small-group dynamics (e.g., consensus-seeking, listening, communicating effectively, trust- and credibility-building, resolving conflict, processing information, and learning/analyzing power relationships). These concepts are illustrated more specifically through board members' references to learning: "how to work with a group of diverse people," "how to disagree," "to be patient with the slowness of decision-making," "to develop a thick skin about losing and winning," "to hold your own in a discussion," and "to cut through to the core of what you hear and read."

The Contextual Twist

These foci on conventional group decision-making concerns are supplemented by special needs for knowledge of processes related to the unique blend of authority, accountability, and vulnerability which distinguishes school board membership from that of other types of small groups (e.g., Houle, 1989). Part of the distinction centers on the realities of conducting meetings in the sunshine of public view and media scrutiny. And part of it has to do with the perennial, (and pragmatically

unresolvable), tension associated with the ambiguity, negotiability, and flux in the power relationships between school boards and superintendents (e.g., Tallerico, 1989). The following snippets of respondents' language illuminate these ideas:

> One thing that makes it completely different than any other board that I have and probably ever will sit on is that everything you say, do, or think is in a fish bowl. You're sitting at a table perhaps reacting to something for the first time or perhaps thinking out loud. You've got at least 10 if not 100 or more people out there who don't like something that you've done or are mad about some situation.
>
> The newspapers can always seem to find the one person who goes to San Francisco or someplace for the national meeting and then doesn't attend any of the [conference] sessions. That sort of attitude. And now, with the budget crunch, they don't miss a trick.
>
> Just dealing with people in the community, trying to reach out and find out. Teachers, for example. You just ask them what questions they would like to see raised. The administrators recognize it if you're informed in that way.

Interestingly, what some school board socialization researchers (e.g., Cistone, 1977; Stout, 1982) have viewed as endemic assimilation of traditions of public conduct appears to be routinely resisted in the present sample. That is, though some respondents reinforced the importance of their learning not to ask potentially embarrassing questions of the administration at open board meetings, and to "present a united front" to the public (i.e., consensual voting) regardless of the depth of disagreement on issues discussed in private, other board members expressed with equal conviction the importance of their learning quite an opposite process-protocol:

> You know, we've even discussed this among ourselves [the

> board] and we all agreed we'd only need a one-member board, or no board at all, if we all always agreed with the superintendent!
>
> I think it's more acceptable now to vote against something than it was two-and-a-half years ago. I think that's their problem more than it is mine or the superintendent's. I never understood it, but the pressure was there right from the beginning [from other board members]. That strong pressure to vote for something if you oppose it because we have to provide this "community". I think that's bad.

This finding reinforces what several other studies underscore regarding the changing assumptions about leadership, and the increased diversity of values, of today's school boards (e.g., Cunningham & Hentges, 1982; IEL, 1986; Tallerico, 1989).

Sources and Means of Learning

Inquiry as to how school board members acquire both the process and content knowledge identified as essential revealed two general categories of sources or means: on-the-board experience and transfer-of-knowledge from other settings. The latter will be treated first, as findings related to it are fewer in number.

Indicative of the perceived power and influence of previous experience in other work-groups is the fact that just 2 of the 28 persons interviewed for this study failed to (unsolicitedly) mention it. A wide variety of settings were identified within the broad rubric of transferable-knowledge sources, including experiences within the school district (e.g., membership in ad hoc committees and task forces, PTOs, and advisory councils), and external to education (e.g., citizens groups, planning commissions, other nonprofit boards, and community service-

related or religious groups). About a third of the respondents, mostly female, also felt they routinely drew upon learnings from previous experience teaching or volunteering in classrooms.

All interviewees attributed at least some of their initial knowledge of essential content or processes to observations of school board meetings prior to their incumbency. This is not to say that they were perennial "board-watchers" (as only one could be characterized in that way), but that, mostly between the time of filing the petition for candidacy and taking the oath of office, board member-candidates regularly attended public school board meetings. (This typically encompassed a period of two-three months.) One respondent also attended meetings in a district outside his own, in order to glean some comparisons and contrasts.

The learning acquired in these ways aligns with Cistone's (1975) emphasis on the critical linkages between board member recruitment and selection processes, and the impact of anticipatory socialization. In addition to seeking to increase their familiarity with current issues and educational programs, what board members are typically listening and observing for in those preincumbency experiences include routine protocols (i.e., how meetings are run and how individual board members participate in them), as well as identification of who the key players seem to be. As one interviewee suggested, however, one learns about protocols not only from observing what goes <u>on</u> in those public sessions, but from what <u>doesn't</u> appear:

> Very little is actually discussed at the open meeting. I used to find that very irritating. Then I realized that telephone conversations or private meetings with the superintendent, workshops, and whatever: everything has already been discussed and debated and now you're just there for the final decision.

Also, as Cistone (1977) and Stout (1982) found, veteran and ex-school board members often serve as important influences on new school board members. Such informal mentorship plays a part in both preincumbency sponsorship, and in continuing development on the board.

On-The-Job (OTJ) Learning

Experience on the school board was clearly the most frequently identified source and means of learning for the 28 participants in this study. Respondents' definitions of the term [OTJ], however, included a range of learnings which can be collapsed into five basic processes. Each will be discussed briefly.

1. "Getting burned," (or at least singed), emerged as a means of learning that was vividly memorable and most likely to prompt a change, either in perspective or in modus operandi, for individual board members. Respondents sometimes alluded to these changes as "growth" via experience, however they were more often referred to with colloquialisms: learning "by fire" or through "trial and error." This learning "the hard way," (that is, through perceived failure or unpleasant experiences) was illustrated in countless ways: through motions made at public meetings which die for lack of a second; through sometimes

surprising (though in retrospect, naive) realizations that resultant practice in classrooms looks little like the intended outcome of the much-debated-and-finally-adopted policy; through making promises which later can not be kept; through being barraged by unfriendly phone calls at home, subsequent to voicing an "outlier" opinion in the newspaper or at a board meeting; etc. Sometimes this learning is vicarious. In other words, board members reported "learning lessons the hard way" not only from their own, but from observing fellow board members' experiences, particularly those that took place during public meetings.

2. Another set of processes which captures board members' views of their own learning includes personalized reflection-on-action and self-examination. These differ from the postmortems or generalized "smarting" which might be associated with the trials-by-fire mentioned above, in that these processes are typically focused on either positive or "neutral" (that is, not negative) experiences or observations. They may be thought of as quite purposeful acts of introspection, observations, and analysis, with the conscious intent of improving performance as a board member. To wit:

> When I come home from school visits I often try to replay whole conversations back in my mind. I think, next time maybe it'll be clearer if I say it this way. Or maybe I should have asked X. I'm thinking about these things all the time. And I find I'm getting better at it.
>
> I don't know if [the superintendent] has more power than he should have, or just a normal amount or average amount of power than any other district. It's something I've given a lot of thought to but just haven't come up with an answer yet.

> I think a lot of my learning was just from paying attention. Watching people. Watching the administration people. Trying to filter and trying to analyze and be critical of my understanding. I like to listen and watch: How's this working and what's going on? Until I really feel like I really know what's going on for the next time.
>
> Sure it takes a lot of time. But it's not just the physical time at the meetings or the physical times setting down to read. It's the mental time that I'm occupied even while driving in the car. A lot of times I'm working, working through something. Working through an issue. Working through a way to present something. It's a part of my brain that has to deal with those things.

As illustrated by these quotations, this reflection, mental rehearsal, and analyses seem to be engaged in more frequently alone than with an other(s). However, third party confidants (sometimes non-education-related, and sometimes mentor veteran or ex-board members) were often mentioned as important contributors to board members' learning. In this capacity, they served primarily as informal "sounding boards" to assist the board member in thinking aloud through ideas. For two illustrations:

> I have lunch with him [the ex-board member who recruited her] the day after every board meeting, to rehash what happened and talk about it. That's been real helpful.
>
> You see I have a mentor also but he's not involved in the school board. He's my boss here. But we often talk a lot, especially over lunch, about what's going on. He'll say, "Well, here's how it looks to me." Or, "You know you've got to think about this, that, and the other thing." And it has been very helpful. It's been very good for me. Now, he doesn't have specific information about the school district, but he knows a helluva lot about people. And that's been a real learning experience for me.

3. A third finding related to sources and means of school board member learning centers on essentially <u>independent</u> "study," including "fact-finding," information-corroboration and "doing

your homework." These processes are captured in the following responses:

> I don't know how good other school districts are at educating their new board members, but I sort of decided to go on my own self-education program right after I got elected. I decided, for example, that I don't know anything about our school buses; so I rode a school bus one morning. I started in the bus garage at 6:00 a.m. with all the bus drivers having coffee and talking. And I just started asking questions.
>
> I've learned the most from visiting the schools myself. So now when something comes up that we need to talk about, it isn't just what I'm reading on a piece of paper. I have a handle on it. I understand when we're talking about this room or that program or those people.
>
> I'm doing this quite selfishly, because I want to be able to make informed decisions and I don't want to rely only on whatever limited information the superintendent may give. Granted he [the superintendent] does a very good job on that. But I don't want to wait for somebody else to take the initiative to give me this tour or introduce me to that person, because then it may never happen.
>
> It's not like we don't have a lot better things to do. You know I do have a full-time job and it's NOT being a school board commissioner! But I don't want to operate in a vacuum. So it takes some doing your homework.

Specific source-persons of this information-gathering run the gamut of friends, neighbors, acquaintances, parents previously unknown to the board member, children, other board members (internal and external to the district), teachers, and school administrators. It is interesting to note that interaction with the superintendent emerged among the <u>least</u> frequently mentioned resources. One interpretation of this phenomenon may be that, because memoranda, telephoning, and "the superintendent's packet" are so much a part of most board-superintendent communication routines, these processes are taken for granted, and therefore,

seldom identified (or viewed) as important sources of learning. Another interpretation is that the information provided by the administration serves as the "baseline data" against which board members compare and contrast learnings gleaned from independent sources.

> I think the administration can give you a very good perspective on these things, but it's the administrator perspective. Sometimes I want to know what the teachers think, or the parents, or the students. What they [administrators] might see as "educating" us is really just providing their perspective on something. There's an administrative viewpoint on certain things.
>
> During the strike, we heard a lot of information coming from the teacher associations, but we didn't hear too much coming from the district. So we didn't really know what was true and what wasn't. What was the real story. So you have to gather the information yourself, to see both sides.
>
> Sometimes people aren't satisfied with the channels and they go straight to the board or they write the board a letter. In theory, the superintendent is supposed to bring it to us. But you don't always know. That's where trust enters. "Are we really hearing [from the administration] what the people out there are wanting?" You have to find out if it's just an isolated "grouch" -- there are some in every organization -- or is it symptomatic of some larger problem. You learn to weigh everything you hear.
>
> Part of it is just the informal network that you build. You can get a lot of information just from the questions that people ask you while you're in line at the bank.

4. Reading, perhaps not surprisingly, is a fourth means of school board member learning. These resources range from administrator-prepared materials and policy manuals, to educative documents, journals, and handbooks produced by state and national school boards organizations. The value, and limitations, of written materials are summarized by one respondent:

> I read everything I can get my hands on, and I request additional books and information all the time. But

> everything always looks real good on paper. And when you put personalities into it, sometimes you just want to throw your hands up in the air and say, "Gee, this isn't working like they said it would in the book!"

5. And finally, notable primarily for their lack of mention by many respondents (and, therefore, prompting direct questioning in an inquiry process otherwise characterized by open-endedness), were formal training/educational activities. In this category are in-district orientation sessions for new members, and regional, state, and national conferences sponsored by board associations (e.g., NSBA, PSBA, and NYSSBA). There are two aspects of particular interest regarding school board member conferences and workshops: (a) the preponderance of negatives used by respondents describing their content (e.g., "they're really geared to telling you what not to do; what not to say;" and (b) that the major benefit of attending such activities is the informal interaction with board members from other school districts (e.g., to share both successes and concerns). More than half of all respondents characterized association-sponsored workshop content as somewhat "lopsided" or skewed toward not-so-subtle reinforcement of board members' "knowing their place":

> Have you ever gone to these things? You know, they use a lot of jargon, about how you're always supposed to work as a team with the administration, and to remember your role and responsibility. Some of it almost sounds like propaganda to me. But then, I suppose there are board members from all kinds of backgrounds. Maybe it's useful to some people.

CONCLUSIONS

Several conclusions and implications may be drawn from this research. Discussion in this section focuses on two conclusions based on theoretical considerations, and one which yields implications for practice.

Theoretical Significance

Findings from this study suggest that there is a need to move away from frameworks which conceptualize school board member learning and development as primarily a function of socialization. In the empirical literature, socialization is often assumed (and/or accorded primacy), with researchers then proceeding to frame arguments in terms of which external variables wield the most influence: e.g., is there greater convergence towards the values of the superintendent or towards more experienced board members (e.g., Cistone, 1977; Griffin, 1988; Kerr, 1964))?. In contrast, the present study reveals that internal variables are also critically important to school board members' learning and development.

Though it is evident that the social and political contexts of board work, and the effects of socialization, partially explain both preincumbency and on-the-job growth, it is also important to consider other, less deterministic explanations of individual development. Taken together, the findings reported herein regarding board members' reflection-on-action, self-education, and critical analysis both of their own behavior and of the information and perspectives provided by others, suggest

that these are, in general, capable and independent-thinking learners, quite purposefully engaged in multiple processes of self-directed growth and development. What seems clear from this research is that the processes of board member learning and development include interaction between individual efforts and social influences. What is less clear is the variety of effects possible. The latter is a question which remains for future research.

In sum, then, theoretical tendencies to focus on external socializers, absent attention to internally-driven factors, may illustrate a flaw in framing all sides of the learning equation. Future research on school board member development would benefit from guidance by conceptual frameworks which are broader than those previously offered by socialization theorists. Results of such studies might provide more enlightened insights related to becoming and being a school board member.

What Are Some Alternative Perspectives?

Obviously, it's easier to pooh-pooh the purported limitations of extant theoretical and empirical work than to propose (and operationalize) viable alternatives. What, for example, is meant by "broadened conceptual considerations"? How might such frameworks be different? Though the present study yielded no elegant, fully-formed grounded theory, some alternative directions are suggested by this research.

One possibility is to follow the lead of Stout (1982), who attempted to move the study of board members away from a narrow

focus on socialization to an expanded perspective combining enculturation, small-group theory, and rites of passage. Yet her framework, although admittedly broader and more multifaceted than many, still seemed to fail to account for the individual/internal determinants argued previously.

Perhaps another possibility would be to draw upon the perspectives of both adult learning (e.g., Knowles, 1970, 1980; Levine, 1989) and reflective-practice theories (e.g., Schon, 1983). The former enjoys ever-increasing credibility and applicability to mature students' and teachers' growth and development; the latter has been helpful in understanding professional practice in general. Might some integration of the two provide the needed conceptual balance to the socialization perspective of school board member learning and development? The findings of this study reveal considerable use of trial-and-error and experiential learning, practical knowledge-generation, informed intuition, and reflection within the context of practice...all of which seem to suggest hitherto unexplored linkages to adult learning and reflective-practice conceptual frameworks.

To illustrate more specifically a potential connection to adult learning theory, we can revisit the overlapping, data-grounded themes of self-education, critical appraisal of information/experience, and subtle resentment of the implied message of "knowing your place" which some board members sensed coming from the local district and board association

professionals. These themes, (particularly the latter), can be interpreted as pointing towards what Knowles (1970, 1980) would define as "pedagogical assumptions": that is, viewing learners as dependent personalities, teachers as expert transmitters of knowledge, and teacher-learner relationships as authority-oriented. (Applied to this illustration, it is assumed that the school board member is the learner and the educational professional the teacher.) In contrast, the "andragogical" constructs undergirding adult learning theory assume that learners: are self-directing, are driven by internal rather than external motivators, and highly value reciprocity and exchange in facilitator-learner relationships (Knowles, 1970, 1980; Levine, 1989). As Knowles (1984) contends, the misapplication of pedagogical models to contexts more appropriately served by adragogy can result in tension, resentment, and resistance in learners. Could these ideas help us understand what happens when school board members' capabilities, needs, and desires to take responsibility for their own learning are ignored, neglected, or simply unappreciated?

Likewise, to illustrate the potential explanatory power of new linkages to reflective-practice frameworks (e.g., Schon, 1983) within the specific context of board member learning and development, it may be useful to re-examine an example representative of respondents' reliance on experienced practice, analysis, and evolution of informed "ways of doing":

> At board meetings, our superintendent, if he doesn't like what is being said, he's very clear. He uses body language

> very loudly and I've found that very distracting. So I've learned that, right before I say something I know he'll disagree with, I just don't look at him. I just smile as a way of dealing with it. People would say to me afterwards, because the meetings are televised, "Did you see?" And I'll say, "No, I never saw it." So, you do what needs to be done, and you say what has to be said and you don't let yourself be persuaded by people who don't want to hear it.

As Schon (1989) explains, the surfacing and critique of "tacit understandings that have grown up around the repetitive experiences of a specialized practice" may take the form of "retrospective reflection on past practice" or reflection "while in the midst of" action (p. 201). Such reflective analysis may be "undertaken either in a spirit of idle speculation or in a deliberate effort to prepare for future cases" (Schon, 1989, p. 201). In the example cited above, the board member is dealing with an open-meeting situation and a political context...two characteristics which likely parallel Schon's assumptions of a unique, ambiguous, or uncertain setting for practice. Moreover, the practitioner-board member has, through reflection-on-action, developed a means of understanding and approaching this complex "specialized practice". Whether the strategy this informant has devised qualifies as an "artistic" response, or otherwise "fits" a reflective-practice theory-in-use, and whether board work in general can be considered "professional practice," are questions which remain open to debate and inquiry. But perhaps the present findings and their interpretations provide at least a partial basis for suggesting additional exploration of linkages between school board member learning and reflective-practice

perspectives.

Implications for Practice

An awareness of the aforementioned overemphasis on external social influences at the theoretical level can enlighten thinking at the applied level as well. Conventional wisdom regarding both the value of "board inservice," and superintendents' perennially-expressed need to "educate" board members (Crowson & Morris, 1990), may be misguided or, at least, miscalculated in import. Commonly-held assumptions about board members may grossly underestimate their independent learning capacities (and preferences), and at the same time overestimate their reliance on (and regard for) either formal training or the educational professionals' expertise and guidance. It may be significant that superintendents, as well as school board association conferences, were identified least frequently among the numerous learning resources valued by school board members in this study. Perhaps the most useful message for both practitioners and professors of educational administration is one captured by the school board member who wondered:

> Do you [at the university] teach them to treat us like students? I don't think we need all that much guidance. We're parents and professionals in our own right. So what if we're not trained educators? What we need is to have our views taken seriously. You [again, at the university] could help a lot by teaching them to be better listeners to school board members. Like you're listening to me now. Why don't our administrators ask us questions like this?

Final Remarks

In sum, the data yielded by this research contribute both descriptively and theoretically to the extant knowledge-base. The evidence suggests that board members are neither passive assimilators of a school board social culture, nor powerless novices in the construction of their own learning. It seems that it is time for traditional perspectives to be replaced with images of school board members proactively directing their own professional development. Moreover, such revised images need to be reckoned with both in theory and in practice.

REFERENCES

Anderson, J. R. (1982). Acquisition of cognitive skill. Psychological Review, 89, 369-406.

Anderson, J. R. (1987). Skill acquisition: Compilation of weak-method problem solutions. Psychological Review, 94, 192-210.

Bogdan, R., & Biklen, S. K. (1982). Qualitative research for education. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Boyd, W. L. (1976). The public, the professionals, and educational policy making: Who governs? Teachers College Record, 77, 539-577.

Cistone, P. J. (Ed.) (1975). Understanding school boards: Problems and prospects. Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath.

Cistone, P. J. (1977). The socialization of school board members. Educational Administration Quarterly, 13(2), 19-33.

Crowson, R. L., & Morris, V. C. (1990). The superintendency and school leadership. A paper presented at the annual meeting of the AERA, Boston, April, 1990.

Cunningham, L. L. (1986). The Ohio State University Survey of State School Board Associations. Unpublished manuscript, Ohio State University.

Cunningham, L. L., & Hentges, J. T. (1982). The American school superintendency, 1982, A full report. Rosslyn, VA: American Association of School Administrators.

Eulau, H. (1969). Micro-macro political analysis. Chicago: Aldine.

Festinger, L., Schachter, S., & Back, K. (1950). Social pressures in informal groups. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Fuhrman, S. H., & Elmore, R. F. (1990). Understanding local control in the wake of state education reform. Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 12(1), 82-96.

Goldhammer, K. (1964). The school board. New York: Center for Applied Research in Education.

Goslin, D. A. (Ed.). (1969). Handbook of socialization theory and research. Chicago: Rand McNally.

Griffin, D. (1988). The socialization of school board members

in the state of Connecticut. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Connecticut.

Gross, N. (1958). Who runs our schools? New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Gross, N., Mason, W.S., & McEachern, A. W. (1958). Explorations in role analysis. New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Guba, E., & Lincoln, Y. (1985). Naturalistic inquiry. Beverly Hills: Sage.

Hare, A. P. (1962). Handbook of small group research. New York: Free Press.

Houle, C. O. (1989). Governing boards: Their nature and nurture. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Iannaccone, L., & Lutz, F. W. (1970). Politics, power, and policy: The governing of local school districts. Columbus, OH: Merrill.

Institute for Educational Leadership. (1986). School boards: Strengthening grass roots leadership. Washington, DC: Author.

Kask, K. M. (1990). Training needs of Ohio school board members as perceived by school board members and superintendents. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. The Ohio State University.

Kerr, N. D. (1964). The school board as an agency of legitimation. Sociology of Education, 38 (1), 34-59.

Kimbrough, R. B. (1964). Political power and educational decision-making. Chicago: Rand McNally.

Kirst, M. W. (1983). Effective schools: Political environment and educational policy. Planning and Changing, 14(4)), 234-244.

Knowles, M. (1970). The modern practice of adult education: Andragogy versus pedagogy. Chicago: Follett.

Knowles, M. (1980). The modern practice of adult education: From pedagogy to andragogy (2nd ed.). Chicago: Follett.

Knowles, M. (1984). The adult learner: A neglected species (3rd ed.). Houston: Gulf Publishing.

Levine, S. L. (1989). Promoting adult growth in schools: The promise of professional development. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Lincoln, Y. (1985). Organizational theory and inquiry: The

paradigm revolution. Beverly Hills: Sage.

Lutz, F. W. (1980). Local school board decision-making. Education and Urban Society, 12 (4), 452-465.

Lutz, F. W., & Iannaccone, L. (Eds.). (1978). Public participation in local school districts: The dissatisfaction theory of democracy. Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath.

McCarty, D. J., & Ramsey, C. E. (1968). Community power, schoolboard structure and the role of the chief school administrator. Educational Administrator Quarterly, 4 (2), 19-33.

McCarty, D. J., & Ramsey, C. E. (1971). The school managers. Westport, CT: Greenwood.

Merton, R. K. (Ed.). (1968). Social theory and social structure. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.

Miklos, E. (1988). Administrator selection, career patterns, succession, and socialization. In N. J. Boyan (Ed.), Handbook of research on educational administration (pp. 53-76). New York: Longman.

Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (Eds.). (1984). Qualitative data analysis: A sourcebook of new methods. Beverly Hills: Sage.

Minar, D. W. (1966). The community basis of conflict in school system politics. American Sociological Review, 31, 822-835.

Moore, W. E. (1969). Occupational socialization. In D. A. Goslin (Ed.), Handbook of socialization theory and research. Chicago: Rand McNally.

Muth, R., & Azumi, J. (1987, fall). School reform: Whither boards of education? Metropolitan Education, 1 (5), 40-56.

Namit, C. (1989). Solving real-life problems takes the tedium out of board member training. The American School Board Journal, 176 (3), 45-53.

Nowakowski, J., & First, P. (1989, winter). Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 11(4), 389-404.

Parsons, T. (1951). The social system. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.

Parsons, T. (1961). An outline of the social system. In T. Parsons (Ed.), Theories of society. New York: Free Press.

Robinson, G. E., & Bickers, P. M. (1990). Evaluation of superintendents and school boards. Arlington, VA: Educational Research Service.

Schon, D. A. (1983). The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action. New York: Basic Books.

Schon, D. A. (1989). Professional knowledge in practice. In T. J. Sergiovanni & J. H. Moore (Eds.), Schooling for tomorrow: Directing reforms to issues that count (pp. 188-206). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Smith, M. P. (1974). Elite theory and policy analysis: The politics of education in suburbia. Journal of Politics, 36, 1006-1032.

Stout, J. G. (1982). The enculturation of new school board members: A longitudinal study in seven school districts (Doctoral dissertation, Arizona State University). Dissertation Abstracts International, 43, 1006A.

Tallerico, M. (1989). The dynamics of superintendent-school board relationships. Urban Education, 24(2), 215- 232.

Thomas, M. D., & Gregg, R. T. (1962). the interaction of administrators and school boards. Administrator's Notebook, 10(6).

van Gennep, A. (1960). The rites of passage. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Wirt, F. M., & Kirst, M. W. (1989). Schools in conflict (2nd ed.). Berkeley, CA: McCutchan.

Wittrock, M. C. (Ed.). (1986). Handbook of research on teaching. New York: Macmillan.

Zeigler, L. H., & Jennings, M. K. (1974). Governing American schools: Political interaction in local school districts. North Scituate, MA: Duxbury.

Zeigler, L. H., Kehoe, E., & Reisman, J. (1985). City managers and school superintendents: Response to community conflict. New York: Praeger.